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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: CHAVEZ CARRIES BOLIVIA'S WATER IN CHILE SEA SCUFFLE

Classified By: Mark Wells, Acting Political Counselor,
for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

Summary

1. (C) Three months ago President Hugo Chavez began a rhetorical offensive in support of Bolivia's claim to its historic Pacific coastline, seized by Chile in 1879. Chavez's campaign has made international headlines, and resulted in Venezuela and Chile recalling their ambassadors for consultations. Chavez has incorporated the Bolivian sea claim into his self-styled Simon Bolivar mythology, frequently portraying the Chileans as oligarchs. MFA officials claim everything is fine under the surface and hope for relations to normalize. Meddling in Bolivia's sea claim is a win-win for Chavez as a "Bolivarian" foreign policy issue, a distraction from his domestic political problems, and a helping hand to Bolivian ally Evo Morales. End Summary.

Plowing Toward the Sea

2. (U) President Hugo Chavez began in October to press publicly for Bolivia to regain sovereign access to the Pacific coast, land which Bolivia lost to Chile in 1879 during the War of the Pacific. In several public comments Chavez spoke of his dream of swimming in "a Bolivian beach." He subsequently elaborated on the theme by declaring that that Simon Bolivar, liberator of Bolivia and Venezuela, had bestowed access to the sea on the Bolivians when drawing the map of Gran Colombia during the independence era. But, Chavez adds, the "Chilean oligarchy" seized the coast for "economic reasons" during the war. Chavez claims that the Venezuelan president in 1879 opposed the land grab, and that it has been Venezuelan state policy ever since.

3. (U) Chavez cited recent statements by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, former President Jimmy Carter, and Brazilian Formin Celso as growing international support for resolution of the issue. He announced he would raise Bolivian access to the sea at future summits, a promised he fulfilled during the Monterrey Summit (though only in press encounters, we understand). Chavez requested on January 7 that the Chilean government to take "a more humble attitude" with Bolivia, which has suffered economically from not having a port. Bolivian indigenous leader Evo Morales has thanked Chavez for his public support on the issue.

Chile Takes Exception

4. (C) In reaction to Chavez's statements, Santiago recalled its ambassador, Fabio Vio, on November 15 for consultations; the Venezuelans reciprocated shortly thereafter. The Chilean Charge d'Affaires had told poloff in December that Vio expected to return at the beginning of the year, thinking that the issue would cool over the holidays. Plans changed during the Monterrey Summit, however, after Chavez accused Chilean President Ricardo Lagos of misrepresenting the facts of Chile's "occupation" of Bolivia's coastline. Lagos denied lying, pointing out that Bolivian access to the sea is a bilateral issue. Both the Venezuelan MFA and the Chilean Embassy confirmed to poloff that their respective ambassadors would not return to their posts in the near future.

MFA Hopes All Will Blow Over

5. (C) The MFA's Chile Desk Officer Romero Dimas told poloff January 14 the GOV hoped relations with Chile would be "normalized" once the public spotlight on the issue passes. He said that despite the mud slinging between its presidents, Venezuela and Chile enjoy good relations, citing

accomplishments by an ad hoc bilateral working group (which

last convened in 2001). He characterized support for Bolivia's maritime claims as one of traditional solidarity among Latin American countries, though he admitted that President Chavez has pushed the issue more than previous presidents. Romero was not aware of any attempt at discussing the issue privately at the Monterrey Summit, a fact confirmed by the Chilean Embassy.

Comment

16. (C) Like most Chavez political plays, there is a self-serving interest under the surface of this issue. His recounting of the War of the Pacific is revisionist, cast as a struggle between "the people" of Bolivia and "the oligarchy" of Chile. Chavez has found a low-risk issue to flog around his neighborhood, giving him the appearance of a statesmen, at least among his core supporters. He seems willing to sacrifice relations with Chile, though he has thus far stopped short of formally breaking ties. Casting the issue as poor Bolivia at the mercy of rich (by comparison) Chile, Chavez looks like a champion for the underdog. And, certainly his efforts have the practical objective of boosting support for Evo Morales, his ideological ally in Bolivia.

17. (C) That said, we believe most other Latin American presidents must wonder why Chavez, whose country has outstanding territorial differences with Colombia and Guyana, would go out on a limb for Bolivia.
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